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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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RARE TOY DEER DOOMED UNLESS HELP ARRIVES

It is now absolutely certain that the smallest, most colorful and unique of North America's deer species--the Key deer--which exists on a handful of flat keys or islands 100 miles from Florida's mainland, will shortly become extinct along with its unduplicated habitat unless drastic measures are taken to protect it in its own peculiar environment, declared wildlife experts of the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service today.

Only 70 of these "pygmy" deer--whom some scientists call a distinct species--were left on Big Pine and No Name Keys in 1947; 40 were left in 1950; today, only 32, or even less, can be counted--tomorrow, the count may be a cipher unless immediate action is taken.

Few and far between are those fortunate individuals who have seen the tiny animal. Around 26 to 29 inches high, 38 inches long, weighing in at a mere 30-35 pounds for bucks; 20-25 pounds for does, it is about the size of a very small collie. Fawns are no bigger than the ordinary cottontail rabbit.

The deer have been slaughtered by invading poachers, who run them into the sea with dogs to be shot. Fires, hurricanes, and crocodiles destroyed others.

And now the whizzing motorist on the overseas highway to Key West is unwittingly hastening the little Key deer's ultimate death warrant. Last year eight of the remaining 40 were run over and killed by cars alone, as they attempted to find water in the roadside ditches.

This dropped their dwindling population to the present extremely dangerous level of not more than 32 remaining survivors. If and when adequate help is rushed, this number might be raised in a few years to around 200, which would insure them against the complete oblivion toward which they are headed.

Two unsuccessful attempts have been made to save the Key deer through legislative action to establish a definite sanctuary.

Because of its delicate, centuries-old adjustment to its own unusual ecological keys' background, the surviving herd cannot be transplanted to another region where they might be better protected from onrushing civilization.

Since time immemorial they have waged their fight for survival in a harsh, almost waterless habitat. Key deer were the first deer to be seen by white men in the New World. Columbus described them in his fourth-trip report to his royal sponsors.

In the year 1545 they were again observed and noted by Hernando d'Escalante in his Memoirs, written after he was held captive by Indians in the lower keys of the Key West chain.

Not only would full protection rescue a vanishing race of picturesque deer, it would also help to preserve plants and birds that are among the most interesting this country can offer the nature-lover and student.

Birds such as the uncommon white-crowned pigeon, whose chief feeding ground is located where the Key deer browse, would be also protected. Tropical vegetation types in large numbers found nowhere else in the United States would be preserved.

Then tourists and nature students--scientists and just plain lovers of the great outdoors--would be able to see flora and fauna far out of the ordinary on the range of the tiny Key deer whose ranks might be raised to the safe figure of 200. This is the number the experts call a safeguard against extinction.

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